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Cross-cultural reader response to original and translated poetry: An empirical study in four languages

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers have conducted empirical studies in reader response, which have either contested or confirmed earlier theories. Indeed, the 1970s and 1980s saw the shift from interpreting the page to looking into reading processes, but the studies remained on the level of abstraction. Our study follows the trend towards evidence-grounded investigations by examining real readers' reactions to poetry and innovates by looking into cross-cultural receptions of a poem in its original and translated versions. To verify whether responses to poetry are universal or culture specific, a rigorous method was adopted: 500 humanities undergraduate students from two different countries (Brazil and Ukraine) were asked to read Poe's "The Lake" and to gauge their reactions using a questionnaire with a fifteen-item semantic differential scale. Participants read either the original version in English (i.e., a foreign language to them) or its translation into their mother tongue (Portuguese, Russian, or Ukrainian). The results point to statistically significant differences within and between the groups. The findings indicate that first-hand responses to poetry are largely culture specific and that the translations also influence reactions.

Keywords

Reader response, cultural differences, translation, poetry reading, empirical research, quantitative methods

Introduction

From the publication of Rosenblatt's seminal *Literature as Exploration* in 1938, reader response theory has had a long history.¹ Since the shift of focus from the text as an object to be examined from a distance to the notion that it only comes to life when the reader constructs its meaning, many models of how readers react to the words on the page have been proposed.² However, most of these works remained at the theoretical level. We agree with Longhurst's postulation that

academic guesswork needs to be informed by modes of analysis [. . .]. What seems to be needed at this point is a cultural criticism which seeks to relate, dialectically, theoretical analysis and empirical sociological practices in order to question the kind of historical and cross-cultural generalizations.³

Still not arguing from an empirical basis but moving toward "the flesh-and-blood people who read the book,"⁴ Rabinowitz offered a four-fold "practical analytic device":

1. Rules of notice allow the reader to establish a hierarchy of important details;
2. Rules of signification enable the reader to determine symbolic meaning so that conclusions can be drawn about the psychology of characters;
3. Rules of configuration help the reader to recognize patterns and formulas, and
4. Rules of coherence assist the reader in structuring the text into a unified whole.⁵

In Rabinowitz's view, real readers always look for authorial, intentional meaning by applying these rules.⁶ We understand that these real readers' emotional and cognitive responses to texts as well as the conventions that are part of the act of reading should be observed empirically. Conventions involve

elements such as meter and layout. Individuals also have pre-reading expectations, which may vary according to their level of expertise and to the culture they are inserted in.

According to Kramsch, “[t]he interaction of a reader, or a community of readers, with texts of any kind, has been called a literacy event.”⁷ She adds that “[t]he knowledge that goes into literacy events draws on the larger cultural and historical context of production and reception of texts in a particular discourse community.”⁸ However, studies of real readers in action like the present one are still few. An exception is de Beaugrande’s article on the responses to contemporary poetry reading by a group of North American university students.⁹ The researcher classified these responses according to typical operations that the students conducted such as generalizing, paraphrasing, hedging, citing, and associating with key words. De Beaugrande supports the idea that ordinary, not expert, readers should be the target sample in empirical literary studies as they constitute the bulk of natural reading audiences. At the same time, the author is uncertain about the status of a reader’s response in literary research as the respondents both expand and reduce the text world by their reactions.

Cross-cultural factors have been investigated by Chesnokova et al., who found significant differences between the responses of American, Brazilian, and Ukrainian participants reading Poe’s “Annabel Lee” in its original and translated versions.¹⁰ Their results show that Brazilians regarded the poem in English more romantic, more melancholic, more nostalgic, more sensitive, and warmer. Americans considered the original poem shorter and more varied. Unlike the other two groups, Ukrainians were somewhat neutral in their reactions. Among other findings of that study, Brazilians reading the translation into Portuguese considered the text more romantic and more beautiful than Ukrainians reading the Ukrainian version. The latter considered the translated version into their L1 sadder and more touching. In the present original study, we aim to examine collective responses to another poem by the same author so as to check whether the differences detected earlier persist. In other words, we want to try to find out if these differences are context dependent. Our ultimate goal is to argue for the need of undertaking cross-cultural studies of reader response to original and translated poetry.

Literature Review

Nearly 100 years ago, Formalists argued for a scientific approach to literary texts.¹¹ However, after the advent of reader response theories, looking only at textual properties and what makes a text literary is necessary but not sufficient. For instance, Iser explains that a text is structured and follows conventions, but literary reading only materializes through “the interaction between its structure and its recipient.”¹² This view has also been supported by Eco,¹³ among others (for more references, see Tompkins¹⁴). The present study holds that, in order to examine how literary texts impact readers, empirical studies of reader response must be conducted. In fact, hermeneutic approaches and theoretically based postulations on reading are beginning to share ground with data-led approaches which look at evidence derived from the act of reading (e.g., Kuiken et al.; Sikora et al.; and Fialho).¹⁵

This study makes an original contribution to empirical studies on reader response by examining readers’ reactions to the original and translated versions of a specific poem by one of the most popular American Romantic poets. Widely known also as a prose writer and a predecessor of detective genre, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) has enriched romantic literature with poems such as “Israfel” (1831), “The Raven” (1845), and “Annabel Lee” (1849) where mystic symbols and a blurred plot add to the creation of dramatic effect of alienation and oblivion. Poe’s romanticism is described as “dark and brooding.”¹⁶ Some critics come to the point of suggesting that his readers are challenged “not only to read him but to solve him”¹⁷—a rather playful statement which takes into account the fact that, as a forerunner of detective fiction, Poe loved riddles and considered himself a genius who could solve any puzzle. Criticism on Poe abounds: a vast array of literary interpretations has been proposed for his works (see, for instance, the journal *Poe Studies: History, Theory, Interpretation*).

The poem selected for the present study was titled "The Lake" when it was first published in 1827. Two years later, a cryptic dedication was added: "To —". Fascinated by enigmas, Poe seems to have posed yet another puzzle. To date, no information has been produced that may help clarify this change. There has been a suggestion that the setting corresponds to Lake Drummond, outside Norfolk, Virginia, also known at the time as Dismal Swamp.¹⁸ Legend has it that it was haunted by a pair of ghosts, one lover having gone mad when he thought his lover had died. This theme would be perfect for a romantic poet, influenced by gothic tradition. As Poe mentions the spring of his youth, this may be a reminder of himself as a young boy. The mention of the lost Garden of Eden is also evocative of the couple, and the alliteration of "l" throughout the poem emphasizes the tone of lament and loneliness.

Criticism of "The Lake" has followed the tradition of subjective interpretations. Acknowledged critics view the poem as an anthem of the poet's private solitude—"an early picture of pleasure in loneliness and the terror."¹⁹ An attempt was made to relate the poem to the author's personal likings and life style, while Swigget holds that "Poe loved to dwell in haunted woodland, with dark waters embedded in the dim and misty air . . . In [. . .] "The Lake" there is a couplet which is a key to his solace in the strange and sad."²⁰ He is referring to "Yet that terror was not fright/But a tremulous delight."²¹

Among the vast amount of literary criticism on Poe, Wang is especially interesting as a summary of the writer's main concerns.²² In his article, the critic compares Poe's narrative techniques, aesthetic thoughts, and themes with those of modernist writers, and places him as a forerunner of modernism, German expressionism and surrealism. According to Wang, Poe's works

depicted the alienated and isolated characters subject to self-fragmentation and self-destruction in a world of wasteland devoid of any meaning and significance. Poe's strong sense of spiritual alienation and isolation in society embodied in his literary protagonists provided a perfect model for the Modernists.²³

Resisting realism, Poe moved from the world outside to the world inside the characters, as we can see in "The Lake." Wang also shows how Poe moved from the physical time—so dear to realist writers—to psychological time.²⁴ The latter placed "emphasis on the character or the speakers' mind experience, [and] constructed his works by using the time on the mind rather than the time on the clock."²⁵

As for the theme of alienation and loneliness, foregrounded in "The Lake," Wang writes that

[i]n The Lake—To—(1827), the speaker in the opening stanza clearly states his fondness for the lake of loneliness and desolation as he says: "So lovely was the loneliness / Of a wild lake," and from childhood he loves to "haunt of the wide world a spot."²⁶ To the speaker, however, the terror of the lone lake "was not fright, / But a tremendous delight," and death is hiding "in that poisonous wave."²⁷ Meditating in a lake remote from the turmoil of the daily life, the speaker finds solace in his "lone imagining"²⁸ with a solitary soul upon the grave in the gulf of the lonely lake.²⁹

What is really interesting about "The Lake" is the fact that it offers two moments. As noted by Sova, in this very early poem, Poe shifts the narrator's mood from a less melancholic opening—that is, from a longing to "youth's spring"—to the depressive view "which brings about thoughts of death and deterioration."³⁰ This move is also noticed by Frank and Magistrale but built as a kind of paradox when they argue that

the contemplative union of beauty and death is not so much a morbid imagining as it is central and necessary to the poet's desire to transcend all material banality, to locate the beauty behind

or within the terror, to regard dying as a step towards the beauty beyond. Although the poet finds that “Death was in that poisonous wave,” the terror of the lone lake points the way to hidden paradises of the imagination.³¹

As Mabbot claims, this is very much in line with Poe’s adherence to actual romanticism with its fascination with nature albeit dark and sinister. Thus, in the last line of the poem, Poe holds that the “solitary soul could make an Eden of that dim lake”—the author’s hymn to solitude when the lyrical hero actually praises the morbid darkness and loneliness of the lake.³²

In sum, a typical representative of the romantic period, “The Lake” may stir readers’ imagination when they recreate the setting and the emotional attitude the narrator brings into the scene, noticing the poet’s loneliness, his melancholic attitude, his attraction to death and depression. However, because this particular poem offers a shift in mood, readers may be differently affected by one or the other moment. In other words, their experience of the melancholic mood may vary.

While it is the critic’s job to produce interpretations and publish them, the critic must be seen as yet another reader whose interpretations do not necessarily have to be taken for granted. In interpreting, three basic components should be considered: the text, the reader who tries to make sense of it, and the context in which reading and evaluation take place.³³ Readers’ cultural background must therefore be taken into consideration. In this article, we highlight the influence of national groups in reader response and innovate by considering the role that first and foreign languages may have in this response. Despite the long tradition and prolific production on Poe’s work by literary critics, to our knowledge, no study comparing cross-cultural reactions of actual readers to Poe’s poetry in different languages has been offered, with the exception of Chesnokova et al.,³⁴ a gap that this article tries to fill.

Several studies have applied empirical research methods in literature. Some have approached the literary text through specific areas, such as discourse analysis (e.g., Hall³⁵), narratology (e.g., Sotirova³⁶), foregrounding (e.g., van Peer³⁷; Miall³⁸; Chesnokova and van Peer³⁹), corpus linguistics (e.g., Louw and Milojkovic⁴⁰; Viana et al.⁴¹), stylistics (e.g., Wiseman and van Peer⁴²), and cognitive studies (e.g., Steen⁴³)—to name just a few. There has also been experimental work in the field of literature.⁴⁴ What these studies share is a tendency to apply scientific methods when investigating literary texts. In this study, as in many of the above, we agree with Gottschall, who proposed that “[l]iterature professors should apply science’s research methods, its theories, its statistical tools, and its insistence on hypothesis and proof.⁴⁵ Instead of philosophical despair about the possibility of knowledge, they should embrace science’s spirit of intellectual optimism.”⁴⁶ For this reason, we follow a rigorous method for data collection and analysis (see ‘Methods’), which moves away from subjective criticism into a replicable way of researching literary reception.

Using scientific research methods to examine literary reading, Miall and Kuiken argue that studies in reader response should move away from ideal readers and examine genuine readers’ emotional reactions to poetry.⁴⁷ They hold that this perspective allows us to develop a better-informed view of the evaluative process and obtain evidence-based data that may bring to light the extent to which real readers’ response to poetry is universal or culture/language specific. Although Miall and Kuiken give prominence to actual readers’ backgrounds, they do not compare readers from different cultures reading in a foreign language.⁴⁸ This is precisely what this study does.

In addition, this study cannot disregard the debate on whether language influences thought or whether thought exists independently of the speaker’s language as these discussions may throw light on reader’s responses to literary reading, which is our focus here. According to Boroditsky, because different languages require dissimilar things of speakers, they will necessarily not see the world in the same way.⁴⁹ This perspective brings back the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis: “[l]anguage is central to our experience

of being human, and the languages we speak profoundly shape the way we think, the way we see the world, the way we live our lives.”⁵⁰ Boroditsky strongly supports linguistic determinism, which claims that the structural property of a language shapes the way one sees the world. If this is true, the language in which a poem is written will shape the way readers understand it.⁵¹

One of the major opponents of linguistic determinism is Pinker, who argues that thought is prior to language.⁵² It is the mind that creates language, not the other way round. He concludes his book entitled *The Language Instinct* by stating that

[n]ot speaking the same language ‘is a virtual synonym for incommensurability, but to a psycholinguist, it is a superficial difference. Knowing about the ubiquity of complex language across individuals and cultures and the single mental design underlying them all, no speech seems foreign to me, even when I cannot understand a word [. . .]. [W]e all have the same mind.’⁵³

This view holds that thought is universal and that linguistic expression depends on contextual factors. Language does not shape thought, but the cultural environment teaches individuals how to behave and what to expect. This position has found evidence in Bogdashina’s work with nonverbal autistic individuals.⁵⁴ She asks what happens with individuals who do not have the capacity to express themselves in language if thought is constructed by the language one speaks and challenges whether this would mean that they do not think.

Little empirical work has been carried out on cross-cultural responses to literature, as noted by Zhang and Lauer, who investigated whether culture-specific thinking models may influence how German and Chinese children understand fairy tales.⁵⁵ Using a framework current in cross-cultural psychology, they hypothesized that German children would prefer an individualistic-oriented thinking model when evaluating characters. They would also display a more adventurous attitude to plot development, and concrete time and spatial perception. On the other hand, Chinese children would present a social-oriented evaluation of character, a self-restrained attitude toward plot development, and a symbolic time and spatial imagination. Using questionnaires, item-based analysis and factor analysis, Zhang and Lauer noticed differences in the way that the respondents reacted to character evaluation, plot development, and time/space imagination.⁵⁶ To a certain degree, they add evidence to Boroditsky’s⁵⁷ arguments, as their study presents empirical evidence that speakers of different languages perceive the world in different ways. However, it seems to be too bold at this stage to state that language shapes the way people think and perceive the world. What Zhang and Lauer claimed is that the environment seems to have shaped the way the participants in their study responded to the literature they had read.⁵⁸ They argue that

[a]s reader response criticism and reception theory have highlighted, readers fill the “gaps” within the texts by inferring the missing information according to their cultural knowledge. [. . .] In this cognitive framework, the domain of culture regulates the understanding of typical settings, typical genres, and typical attributions of intentions, and is therefore an essential part of meaning formation.⁵⁹

Working with four different languages (i.e., English, Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian), this study examines the reactions of real readers from two different countries (i.e., Brazil and Ukraine) to Poe’s “The Lake.” Our main objective is to add to the limited existing theoretical discussions on cross-cultural responses to literature through an innovative, rigorous, and empirical examination of readers’ reactions to original and translated poetry, which will have important implications for the way literary education is delivered.

Methods

In the light of prior empirical research on reader response to Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry,⁶⁰ a decision was made to use a poem written by the same author to avoid the authorship or the literary period being an intervening variable in the potential comparisons to be made from the previous study and the present one. Here, we worked with Poe’s (1827) “The Lake” for at least four reasons: (1) it is short and it would take respondents approximately 10 minutes to read and answer the questionnaire; (2) it is a canonical poem and has been anthologized⁶¹; (3) it emphasizes individuality and emotion, which could draw participants’ interest; (4) although the language may be somewhat distant from respondents’ experience, it has some supernatural and dark aspects to it, which we believed would be appealing to participants.

A number of research instruments could have been used to collect data—all of which would have their own advantages and disadvantages. Following Chesnokova et al.,⁶² we opted for a questionnaire where participants indicated their responses to Poe’s “The Lake” using a five-point semantic differential scale. This scale allows us to obtain two types of information simultaneously: the direction of response (positive or negative) and its intensity. The instrument avoided any researcher interference in the data being collected (i.e., this could potentially be the case with interviews being conducted by different interviewers with diverse expertise and experiences in distinct countries). The use of questionnaire also had its practical benefits in that it allowed us to involve a large number of participants in this international and cross-cultural research project. The large number of respondents (especially for a study in the field of Literature) is a step forward in meeting the current call for investigations of big datasets; however, most importantly, it was vital in allowing us to examine the influence of first-language background and/or nationality in readers’ reaction to poetic reading.

The first step in questionnaire design involved choosing which translation of “The Lake” was going to be used in the Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian versions of the research instrument. The translation of “The Lake” into Portuguese by Margarida Isabel de Oliveira Vale de Gato was selected as she has conducted her PhD research on Poe and is an experienced translator of his work.⁶³ The Russian version used in the present study was translated from English by Valery Bryusov. As a well-known poet himself and one of leading figures of Russian symbolist movement, his Russian translations of Poe are reputedly among the best ones. The Ukrainian translation was by Anatoly Onyshko, who is also an acknowledged award-winning translator of Poe.

The second step in the design of the questionnaire entailed choosing the adjectives for inclusion in the semantic differential scale. To this end, 100 Brazilian and Ukrainian undergraduate students were invited to join the pilot study. These participants were asked to list ten adjectives that best described their evaluations after they had read “The Lake” in English (twenty Brazilians and twenty Ukrainians), in Portuguese (twenty Brazilians), in Russian (twenty Ukrainians) or in Ukrainian (twenty Ukrainians). Following this initial data collection, the answers in Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian were translated into English, and totals were computed for the participants’ choices. The top fifteen adjectives can be seen in Table 1 in decreasing order of frequency.

Table 1: Pilot participants’ choice of adjectives

Rank	Adjective	Opposite
1 st	Sad	Happy
2 nd	Mysterious	Clear
3 rd	Beautiful	Ugly
4 th	Dark	Light
5 th	Lonely	Gregarious
6 th	Mystical	Physical
7 th	Interesting	Boring

8 th	Dreamy	Down-to-earth
9 th	Melancholic	Encouraging
10 th	Nostalgic	Not longing for the past
11 th	Romantic	Realistic
12 th	Solitary	Social
13 th	Deep	Shallow
14 th	Gloomy	Cheerful
15 th	Exciting	Dull

Aware that there is no perfect synonym/antonym between any pair of words, we selected, as far as possible, one-word opposites which would be easily understood by Brazilian and Ukrainian speakers of English as a foreign language. In one case, a decision was made for a phrase (i.e., “nostalgic” vs. “not longing for the past”), following Chesnokova et al.⁶⁴

The final version of the questionnaire contained five parts. The first one included a brief introduction about the study, guidelines for completion of the research instrument and a reassurance of participants’ anonymity. Next, Poe’s “The Lake” was presented with no indication of the author’s name and/or its title so as to avoid any authorial bias in participants’ reaction to the reading.⁶⁵ Participants were then asked whether they had already read the poem prior to the study. The inclusion of this question is a direct outcome of Chesnokova et al., where the researchers questioned whether participants’ (un)familiarity with “Annabel Lee” had influenced their reactions.⁶⁶ The fourth part consisted of a five-point semantic differential scale where the respondents were asked to indicate their thoughts on the poem (e.g., from “very sad” to “very happy,” including a neutral option). The questionnaire ended with two background questions on the respondents’ sex and age.

The questionnaire in English was developed by all researchers jointly, and then the national groups were in charge of translating the questionnaire to the participants’ mother tongues. Chesnokova et al.’s study examined readers’ reactions to the original text in English and to two translations—one for the Brazilian participants and another for the Ukrainian participants.⁶⁷ However, the linguistic landscape in Ukraine is more complex than it was assumed in that study. In a largely bilingual society, Ukrainian and Russian languages are equally regarded mother tongues and languages of everyday communication though the proportion is unequal for different regions of the country (see more on bilingualism in Ukraine and its implications in Sergeyeva and Chesnokova⁶⁸). For this reason, we decided to adopt two working languages for participants based in Ukraine, allowing them to identify their first language and giving them the choice to answer the questionnaire in either Russian or Ukrainian accordingly. This study therefore encompasses five groups as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant groups

Group	Nationality	Poem	Number of participants
1	Brazilian	Original in English	100
2		Translation to Portuguese	100
3	Ukrainian	Original in English	100
4		Translation to Ukrainian	100
5		Translation to Russian	100

The 500 participants in both countries were comparable in relation to their educational level; all of them were undergraduate students of language and literature at the time of data collection (i.e., between October and December 2015). In Brazil, data were collected at two universities—a private and a public one—in Rio de Janeiro. In Ukraine, the respondents came from three public universities, all of them located in Kyiv.

Most participants were female (83% overall), an expected sex distribution in the student cohort of language-related majors in both countries. The predominance of female participants was higher within the Ukrainian groups (88%) than within the Brazilian ones (75%).

The overall mean age was 21 years old ($SD = 6$), ranging from 17 to 61. However, the data heterogeneity came primarily from the Brazilian respondents, whose mean age was 25 ($SD = 8$). The Ukrainian participants' ages were more homogeneous (17–28 years old), with a mean of 19 ($SD = 1$). Not only was there less uniformity in the generations represented in the Brazilian groups, but these students were also older than the Ukrainians.

The concern for previous knowledge as a potential intervening factor did not seem to be relevant as the majority of the participants (96.5%) indicated that they had not read the poem before filling out the questionnaire. For this reason, this variable was not considered in the present study.

With a view to deciding the most appropriate statistical test to adopt, Kolmogorov–Smirnov was run for all five groups in IBM SPSS 21. As is common practice in the arts and humanities as well as the social sciences, the level of significance was set at $p = .05$.⁶⁹ The results showed that the data were not normally distributed, which meant that nonparametric tests had to be adopted. Two tests were used—Mann–Whitney and Kruskal–Wallis. The former compared between two samples (e.g., Brazilians and Ukrainians reading “The Lake” in English), while the latter was employed for investigations involving a higher number of samples (e.g., participants' reactions to the translated versions to Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian). The following section reports and discusses the results of this study.

Results

Following Chesnokova et al.,⁷⁰ our initial interest was to investigate whether readers' responses to poetry reading would vary due to their cultural background—here operationalized in terms of nationality. We therefore compared the reaction of both Brazilian and Ukrainian readers to Poe's “The Lake” in English. Table 3 shows the significant results yielded by the Mann–Whitney test comparing these two population samples.

Table 3: Responses to Poe's “The Lake” in English: Brazilians vs. Ukrainians compared

Adjectives	Means		P
	Brazilian	Ukrainian	
Dark – Light	1.9783	2.4512	.000
Nostalgic - Not longing	2.2283	2.5366	.009
Lonely – Gregarious	1.5761	1.8049	.042
Interesting – Boring	2.0326	2.4024	.010
Mysterious – Clear	1.6848	2.1707	.001
Mystical – Physical	1.9239	2.268	.007
Solitary – Social	1.4130	2.2439	.000
Gloomy – Cheerful	1.8370	2.3049	.000

The results show the tendency of Brazilian participants to interpret the original version of the poem in a more negative light, that is, one which arouses negative feelings (e.g., lonely) and appraisals (e.g., dark). The themes of darkness, loneliness, and mysticism in “The Lake,” which have been commented on by literary critics in relation to either this specific poem or Poe's poetry, in general (cf. Section 2), were perceived by the pilot participants in our study—hence the inclusion of “dark,” “lonely,” and “mystical” in the semantic differential scale (see Table 1). Moreover, the pairs of adjectives “dark” versus “light,” “lonely” versus “gregarious,” and “mystical” versus “physical” are here identified as statistically significant differences between the reading of this poem by Brazilians and Ukrainians. For the former

national group, darkness, loneliness, and mysticism are perceived more strikingly as features of “The Lake” than for the latter.

When our findings for the Brazilian group are compared to those of Chesnokova et al.,⁷¹ we observe that, once more, readers from this national background believe that a poem by Poe triggers a feeling of nostalgia. Brazilians consistently identified both “The Lake” (under scrutiny here) and “Annabel Lee” (cf. Chesnokova et al.⁷²) as “nostalgic,” and their responses were significantly different from Ukrainians in the present study and from Americans and Ukrainians in the 2009 investigation.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian respondents have a more positive attitude toward the original in English. They view it as less dark, less longing for the past, less lonely, less mysterious, less mystical, less solitary, and less gloomy. The only reaction which differs from this trend relates to participants’ evaluation of whether the poem is interesting or boring: Ukrainians tend to believe “The Lake” is less interesting than what the Brazilian participants thought. This is worthy of note when one compares this finding with Chesnokova et al.’s results.⁷³ In their study of Americans’, Brazilians’, and Ukrainians’ reading of Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” the researchers found that Ukrainians stood out from the other national groups as they perceived the original poem in English to be more boring. There seems to be some initial evidence that, when reading a poem by Edgar Allan Poe in English, Ukrainians would not believe it to be as interesting as readers from other cultural backgrounds. At this stage, we can only speculate whether this is indeed the case. Future empirical studies are needed in order to confirm this hypothesis.

In addition to comparing Brazilian and Ukrainian readers’ responses to the original poem in English, we decided to check how readers from these two countries would respond to the poem in their first languages. For the former group of participants, this meant reading “The Lake” in Portuguese. Ukrainian participants, however, had a choice of reading the poem in either Russian or Ukrainian, depending on their self-identified first language (cf. ‘Methods’). The responses given by these three groups, each consisting of 100 participants, were compared statistically. The significant results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Responses to Poe’s “The Lake” translated: Portuguese vs. Russian vs. Ukrainian

Adjectives	Means			P			
	Portuguese (POR)	Russian (RUS)	Ukrainian (UKR)	Overall	POR-RUS	POR-UKR	RUS-UKR
Sad – Happy	2.1744	2.4000	2.0405	.000	.046		.000
Dark – Light	2.0233	2.8941	2.4730	.000	.000	.002	.047
Melancholic – Encouraging	1.8372	2.5529	2.0135	.000	.000		.002
Nostalgic – Not longing	2.0349	2.6118	2.4459	.000	.000	.002	
Lonely – Gregarious	1.4419	1.7882	1.4054	.002	.002		.041
Mystical – Physical	2.3837	2.0000	1.8919	.006		.005	
Dreamy – Down-to-earth	2.0465	2.0588	2.4595	.012		.033	.026
Exciting – Dull	3.1977	2.5647	2.3108	.000	.000	.000	
Gloomy – Cheerful	2.1163	2.5059	1.9865	.000	.003		.000

According to the Kruskal-Wallis test results, Brazilians found “The Lake” in Portuguese darker, more nostalgic, and duller than the Ukrainian participants who read it in either Russian or in Ukrainian. These findings are similar to the previous comparison between groups in relation to the original poem in English (cf. Table 3). In other words, irrespective of the language in which they read “The Lake,” Brazilians participants regarded the poem in a more negative light. Darkness, one of the features that has been associated to Poe’s romantic poetry (see ‘Literature Review’), is foregrounded in the Brazilian reading

experience of reading “The Lake” in Portuguese as compared to the reading of the poem in either Russian or Ukrainian by Ukrainians (cf. Table 4), a difference which is statistically significant. It is also worthy of note that Brazilian readers perceive the poem to be more nostalgic than the other readers, a finding that is valid for “The Lake” both in English (cf. Table 3) and in Portuguese (cf. Table 4). As a matter of fact, this observation holds true not only for “The Lake” but also for “Annabel Lee.”⁷⁴ Nostalgia is evidenced as a feeling which statistically differentiates the reading experience of the Brazilian participants in both studies.

In contrast, Ukrainians reading the poem in Russian offered the most positive evaluations. They regarded this version of “The Lake” least sad, most encouraging, least lonely, and least gloomy. In this case, the findings cannot be compared to those reported in Chesnokova et al.⁷⁵ because the researchers did not investigate the reaction of those people living in Ukraine for whom Russian is an L1, assuming instead that they would have Ukrainian as their first language. However, the feature of loneliness that critics identify in “The Lake” seems not to be perceived as strongly by those who read the poem in Russian.

Finally, the responses from Ukrainian participants who read the translation in Ukrainian only significantly differed from the other two groups in relation to “dreamy” versus “down-to-earth.” These participants regarded “The Lake” in Ukrainian less dreamy than the Brazilians who read it in Portuguese and the Ukrainians who read in Russian. This result goes hand in hand with what Chesnokova et al.⁷⁶ observed for the reading of “Annabel Lee” in Portuguese and in Ukrainian, thus suggesting that there seems to be a trend in terms of reader reaction to translated versions of Poe’s poems to these languages. In addition, when compared to Brazilians’ reaction to the poem in Portuguese, Ukrainians also found its translation into Ukrainian more mystical, a difference which is statistically significant. This is just the opposite from what was observed in relation to the reactions of different national groups reading the poem in English. As shown in Table 3, Brazilians considered “The Lake” in English more mystical than Ukrainians. Assuming that there indeed is a theme of mysticism in Poe’s “The Lake” as argued by literary critics (see ‘Literature Review’), it seems that the theme becomes more noticeable to Ukrainians when they read the poem in Ukrainian than when they read it in English.

So far, we have contrasted readers’ responses across national groups. We now turn to comparisons within each national group by looking at reactions to the original and the translated version(s) of Poe’s “The Lake.” For the Brazilian group, we used the Mann-Whitney test since there were only two samples to be compared. Table 5 contains the results which reached statistical significance.

Table 5: Brazilians’ responses to Poe’s “The Lake”: original (English) vs. translation (Portuguese)

Adjectives	Means		P
	English	Portuguese	
Mystical – Physical	1.9239	2.3837	.001
Gloomy – Cheerful	1.8370	2.1163	.024

Out of the fifteen pairs of adjectives that were used in the semantic differential scale (cf. Table 1), only two were significant in Brazilian readers’ responses to “The Lake” in English and in Portuguese: “mystical” versus “physical” and “gloomy” versus “cheerful.” In both cases, it is the original version that triggers a more noticeable reaction from Brazilians. They perceive the poem in English as more mystical and gloomier when compared to their reaction to its translation in Portuguese. This result reinforces what had been pointed out in Table 3, namely, that these two features were also helpful in differentiating Brazilians’ from Ukrainians’ reading the original poem. It is interesting to see that the original version of the poem in English seemed to be more successful in achieving one of the features that literary critics have related to “The Lake,” namely, mysticism (see Section 2).

We also compared Ukrainians' responses to the original and translated versions of the poem. However, differently from the Brazilian group, Ukrainians read "The Lake" in one of three languages: English, Russian, or Ukrainian (cf. Section 3). Table 6 shows the significant results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for this within-group comparison.

Table 6: Ukrainians' responses to Poe's "The Lake": original (English) vs. translations (Russian and Ukrainian)

Adjectives	Means			P			
	English (ENG)	Russian (RUS)	Ukrainian (UKR)	Overall	ENG-RUS	ENG-UKR	RUS-UKR
Sad – Happy	2.0976	2.400	2.0405	.000		.011	.000
Dark – Light	2.4512	2.8941	2.4730	.003	.004		.027
Melancholic – Encouraging	1.8171	2.5529	2.0135	.000	.000		.001
Lonely – Gregarious	1.8049	1.7882	1.4054	.016		.029	.049
Interesting – Boring	2.4024	2.1294	1.8784	.002		.002	
Mysterious – Clear	2.1707	1.7882	2.0676	.031	.025		
Dreamy – Down-to-earth	2.0854	2.0588	2.4595	.024			.039
Exciting – Dull	2.6341	2.5647	2.3108	.040		.034	
Solitary – Social	2.2439	1.7294	1.6486	.000	.001	.000	
Gloomy – Cheerful	2.3049	2.5059	1.9865	.000		.027	.000

Overall, the comparison suggests that, out of the three versions, the Russian translation was considered to be the most positive one. The Ukrainian respondents regarded it the lightest and most encouraging, both results reaching statistical significance. However, they tended to regard the poem in Russian more mysterious than in English and dreamier than the version in Ukrainian, differences which were also statistically significant.

In contrast, the readers of the Ukrainian version of the poem held that it was the saddest, loneliest, and gloomiest of the three. When contrasted with the results in Chesnokova et al.,⁷⁷ we see that the versions in Ukrainian of both "The Lake" and "Annabel Lee" are consistently perceived to be sadder than the original versions in English. This perhaps might be understood in light of the fact that Ukrainian folk poetry is often evaluated as sad and, by extension, whatever is written in the language tends to be perceived in the same way by readers, as provisionally argued by Chesnokova et al.⁷⁸ The result for the pair of adjectives "lonely" versus "gregarious" should also be noted here. For the Ukrainians, who read "The Lake" in one of three languages (i.e., English, Russian, and Ukrainian), it is the version in Ukrainian that most saliently triggers this perception of loneliness, which has been identified as a key feature in literary scholarship (see 'Literature Review'). Although being perceived in a rather negative light, the translation into Ukrainian was also evaluated as more interesting and exciting than the English version.

The Ukrainian participants' responses to the original version of "The Lake" do not seem to have stood out as saliently as the translated versions. As shown in Table 6, it was only regarded the least solitary of the three texts.

Discussion

This study innovated by examining responses to a canonical romantic poem in four languages—English, Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian—by readers from two different cultural settings—Brazil and Ukraine. The objective was to investigate the existence of potential differences in real readers' responses collectively as well as identify where such differences lay.

Overall, the results point to statistically significant differences between and within the national groups. The findings indicate that participants' evaluations of Poe's "The Lake" differed considerably in at least two aspects: (1) the cultural background seems to have influenced the way each national group read and interpreted the original text in English, and (2) the original language of the text and its translation into the respondents' first languages might have interfered in the readers' reactions to the poem.

The first set of results pointed to the fact that each group reacted differently to the reading of the poem in English. When comparing Brazilians' and Ukrainians' responses to "The Lake" in the original, the results showed that Brazilian participants were more negative than their Ukrainian counterparts. These reactions may be linked to literary critics' suggestion of a shift in the "The Lake"—from a less to a more melancholic stage (see 'Literature Review'). It might be the case that each stage was seen as more important by each national group. In other words, when reading the original version in English, Brazilians seem to have been primed by the darker moment of the poem whereas Ukrainians might have been touched by the less negative perspective in the text.

If Boroditsky's postulation that language shapes one's understanding of the world were true,⁷⁹ it could be argued that, when the language variable is controlled (i.e., in this case, all participants read the same poem in English), readers' reaction would likely be the same. However, this is not what the findings show: Brazilian readers' response to "The Lake" differed from that of Ukrainian readers significantly on eight out of fifteen variables. Cultural factors other than language seem to have played a role in reception, thus providing evidence for Pinker's claims.⁸⁰ Perhaps the capacity to read and understand, like that of seeing and tasting, is universal,⁸¹ but the way we react to and judge what we see depends on what we have learned from our context.

When comparing Brazilians' and Ukrainians' reading of the translation into Portuguese, Russian, or Ukrainian, significant differences were also found. Brazilians considered the Portuguese version in a more negative light, while Ukrainians had a more positive attitude toward the poem in Russian. One could be tempted to see this as evidence that language shapes one's thought since a number of differences were noted across the three national groups (cf. Table 4), but this cannot be argued on the basis of our findings. Here, both the language and the participant groups differed. In addition, the role of translation must also be acknowledged, that is, each of the three translated versions of "The Lake" (i.e., Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian) might be considered to have a life of its own.

The comparison of the original and translated versions of Poe's "The Lake" within the same national group (see Table 5) may have helped identify the role culture plays in a reader's interpretation of a text. When the results for the Brazilian group reading in English and in Portuguese are compared, only two differences (out of potentially fifteen) reach statistical significance. In both cases, Brazilians' view toward the poem in the original language evoked more negative impressions and feelings. Therefore, one of the questions generated by this study is why Brazilian respondents tended to evaluate the poem in Portuguese as negatively as they did with the English version.

As to Ukrainians' reading in English, Russian, or Ukrainian, the perception varied considerably. The Ukrainian translation was seen in a more negative light than the other two versions—saddest, loneliest, and gloomiest. The fact that the Ukrainian version was seen as more interesting and exciting than the version in English might be related to linguistic issues where the latter language, a foreign one in Ukraine, did not touch these participants as much as their mother tongue did.

In underexplored areas such as the one in which this article is situated, all hypotheses can only be provisional; further investigation is required in order to confirm them. Comparisons between our findings and those reported in Chesnokova et al.⁸² indicate that there is a degree of similarity in relation to how Brazilian and Ukrainian readers respond to Poe's poetry. The findings of this study introduce the

idea of nuances to readers' reactions. It seems that not only the culture from which readers come but also the language in which they read a poem may have affected their responses. We argue that the area of cross-cultural reader response to original and translated poetry is worthy of further exploration.

Conclusion

The seminal findings in this article have relevant implications for literary education. They suggest that readers are situated in a wider socio-cultural background which informs their reading. For this reason, poems such as "The Lake" (or, in fact, any literary text) will not necessarily trigger the same reactions across the globe. Overall, reactions (e.g., noticing darkness, loneliness, and mysticism as pointed out by literary critics) do occur in the data, but these reactions are not observed in the same way across different groups of readers. This means that not only individual but also national differences must be taken into account.

When literature students for whom English is not a first language are asked to read a translation into their L1 and/or decide to do so on their own, they are being exposed to a totally different text. This study has shown that individual responses analyzed collectively vary in terms of both the context to which readers belong and the language in which the message is conveyed. One of our ground-breaking findings is that, even when acknowledged translations are used, as was the case here, reader responses to the original will differ from that of the translation. This may affect the way the readers perceive verbal artistry—for the better or the worse.

Comparisons between our findings and those reported in Chesnokova et al.⁸³ indicate that there is a degree of similarity in relation to how Brazilian and Ukrainian readers respond to Poe's poetry. Hypotheses for the observed similarities in reader response have been formulated here, but other large-scale studies with different poems by Edgar Allan Poe are needed before we can confidently say that this is a feature that is valid for his poetry as a whole.

This study has pointed out that differences in responses do exist and should be further investigated. In addition to expanding the breadth of coverage, we believe it is vital to understand better why these differences have occurred. To this purpose, interviews with participants where they can verbalize their thoughts should be carried out in the future. Comparative stylistic analyses of the translated versions of "The Lake" need to be checked against the responses reported here so that we see whether readers' reactions to the different versions of the poem have been triggered by translators' choices. For now, this large-scale empirical study of literary reading has innovated by showing that responses vary between cultures and that the language in which the poem is read is also an additional variable that affects reader response. However, typical of Poe, our findings have led us to further enigmas, which will need to be solved as the field of cross-cultural reader response to original and translated poetry matures.

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